

Survivors' history

Peter Campbell and Andrew Roberts

Veterans of the user-survivor movement, Peter Campbell and Andrew Roberts, profile the Survivors' History Group, a network of approximately 100 members across the UK and Ireland, who believe that the history of individual and collective action by service users/survivors is both interesting and important, and worthy of preservation.

Key words: Survivor's History Group; Survivors; Mental health; Service user movement

The Survivors' History Group believes that the history of individual and collective action by service users/survivors is both interesting and important. It is easier to look into the future and plan ahead if you have a clear idea how you arrived where you are today. It is also important to know what has and has not been achieved when attempting to build a positive and coherent self-identity.

Survivors of mental distress and people who have been in psychiatric care have been speaking out for a long time, although their voice may not always have been acknowledged and valued. In a recent issue of *Openmind*, Gail Hornstein says that more than 700 service users have managed to publish narratives of their experiences in English (and this is just the number of those that are currently in print) (Hornstein, 2009). The voices of those deemed mad come to us from long before the asylum system was established. In 1436, for example, Margery Kempe dictated an account of her spiritual life that also revealed how she had gone 'out of her mind' after childbirth and been bound in a storeroom to prevent her from self-harming. There is a persistent theme through much of such writing of 'mad' people challenging that designation and protesting at the treatment society has forced on them as a result of it.

Known examples of collective action are exceedingly rare before the 19th century. A 1620 *Petition of the Poor Distracted Folk of Bedlam* is often



Anne Plumb of Manchester Survivor History Group demonstrates how our personal efforts to seize the moment interact with the opportunities and events we encounter to make history

mentioned, but we have not seen an original source cited. By contrast, the Alleged Lunatics Friend Society, founded in 1845, is well documented. It appears to have arisen out of lobbying by former inmates against the 1845 Lunacy Acts, and asylum survivors played an important role in the campaigns of this, and subsequent groups. One of these, John Perceval, was the son of an assassinated Prime Minister. Perceval acted as secretary and spokesman for many years.

An even more dramatic role was played in the United States by ex-patient Clifford Beers. The publication of an autobiography about his experiences in 1908 (Beers, 1908) provided the manifesto for the 'mental hygiene' movement in many countries. Beers, like Perceval, acted as conscientious secretary at the centre of affairs.

It was a very different environment when, in 1971, patients on the locked wards of a Scottish mental

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hospital succeeded in establishing the first group we know of that called itself a ‘union of mental patients’ (SUMP). They and others were part of the movement that became the ‘Federation of Mental Patients Unions’ after a Manchester conference in April 1974. These groups were part of the cultural revolution of their times. Since the mid-1980s, however, service user action groups have become an established part of the mental health arena. Since 1990, they have been bound into the system by the legal requirement to consult with service users on the planning and development of services. Mental health service users may have been trapped by powerlessness, but they have not always been sunk in inaction. Traditions and types of action are rich and varied. The deliberately outrageous authors of *Mad Pride: A celebration of mad culture* (Dellar *et al*, 2000), for example, saw themselves as defending a tradition of protest that would not co-operate with service providers.

Celebrations of history can have surprising and invigorating effects. We expected Mind’s 21 years of service user involvement event in 2006 to make recent activists aware of the significance of Survivors Speak Out, Nottingham Advocacy Group and MindLink in the 1980s. But the conference was surprised when Joan Hughes (1928–2008) told them about how much had gone before,

sweeping away the myth of the movement only being 21 years old.

Joan was a member of the Survivor History Group, which formed in April 2005 and was just finding its feet. The group drafted a summary manifesto in July 2005, which became the basis for a fuller statement in January 2006. The summary manifesto is as follows:

‘We, as a group, aim to:

- be committed to learning from history
- value and celebrate the contribution that mental health survivors have made and are making to that history
- highlight the diversity of survivors in all its expressions
- highlight the diversity and creativity of the survivor contribution through personal accounts, writings, poetry, art, music, drama, photography, campaigning, speaking, influencing
- collect, collate and preserve survivor history

- make survivor history accessible to all who are interested in or studying mental health
- be survivor-led with a steering group made up of a majority of survivors with some interested and co-opted allies
- operate as an independent group.’

A small group of five to 12 members meets monthly in London and we have a network of about 100 members in many parts of Britain and Ireland. A Greater Manchester group was set up in 2008. We also work with other survivor history groups such as Our Mad History, established in Edinburgh in 2007, and Heritage Mental Health, a group based in Rutland and Leicestershire who have developed an exhibition and booklet about mental health history from a survivor perspective.

One danger for a small group starting in south east England is perpetuating the ‘London-centric’ view of our history that so annoys activists from other parts of the country. A way to guard against this is to be aware that we are exploring a diversity of histories rather than one monolithic history. Another way is to encourage the collating, preserving and writing of history in different regions and localities. For example, Anne Plumb, the Manchester member of our management committee, is working with Andrew Hughes from Oldham and Helen Spandler of the University of Central Lancashire on the history of the survivor movement in Greater Manchester. Co-ordinating developments in different parts of the country may be one of the main ways forward for all of us.

The group’s resources are limited but workable. Together for Wellbeing has given us unstinting support since we started, and we often meet in their London offices. We do not have a regular income, but the Hamlet Trust gave us £4,000 as a stimulus and we have had generous donations from individuals; we rely on the support of members and supporters and donations are always welcome.



Helen Spandler with *Asylum to Action*, a book that charts the emergence of mental patients’ unions



Members of the Rutland and Leicestershire Recovery group with their exhibition

One of the original goals of the group was the creation of an archive for survivor history and this was discussed extensively at early meetings. We have not found a place for a central archive, but copies of some important materials are being collected together at the secretary's house. It could be that the creation of a permanent physical archive is a goal for the medium-term rather than the immediate future. In the meantime, we have identified a number of important archives of movement history held by individuals. These include the records of the Scottish Union of Mental Patients and the many English unions during the 1970s; the archives of Survivors Speak Out; the archives of the United Kingdom Advocacy Network (UKAN), including documents about many groups that belonged to it; the archives of poet and activist Frank Bangay covering three decades of campaigning; and an important collection of pamphlets, books and articles collected by Anne Plumb in Manchester. Part of current activity is addressing this material and collating and cataloguing it properly.

In the absence of an archive for hard copies of materials and artefacts, much of our work is focused on developing a website on survivor history. This contains a timeline of important actions and developments, as well as links both to more detailed accounts of groups and activities, and as a collection of important documents in the history of the movement. Individuals can send or email in relevant material that can be slotted into the timeline structure. Most websites come and go, but this website will be preserved indefinitely in the UK Web Archive.

Using the material we have collected, we have developed portable exhibitions of books, historic documents, timelines, survivor biographies, research and creative writing. One of these exhibitions is built on the Manchester collection of Anne Plumb, the other on the London collection. We first exhibited in London in September 2005, and since then have been to Bristol, Manchester, Brighton and Essex Universities. We also displayed material together with the Leicester group at a recent series of six seminars in the British Library, organised by the Survivor Researcher Network.

Survivors may need to reclaim history. Many people are ignorant of what mental health users have achieved in the past, and some are unconvinced that it is really relevant to what could happen today and in the future. Others value it as nostalgia, or the diverting cabaret one is entertained by once the real work has been done. So there is a task there to convince people that history has a central importance.

We also need to make sure that history is as factually accurate as possible and that survivors have the opportunity to challenge inaccuracies and the interpretations that are placed on history. As in so many other contexts, when it comes to our history, it should be *'nothing about us without us'*.

There is a need for richer and more detailed histories to be written about the movement generally and about individual groups within it. *A History of the Nottingham Advocacy Group* compiled by Marian Barnes (2007) is a promising example. This, like other valuable studies we could mention, is written by someone who is not part of the survivor movement, but has based it on interviews with activists as well as an examination of relevant documents.

While welcoming all such histories, we find that some are less factually accurate than others, and some members of the Survivors History Group disagree with some of the interpretations that have been imposed. Debating different views of history and being in a position to express an opinion and be heard is one reason that we need our own history group. An example of such a controversy is the role of anti-psychiatry in the development of service user/survivor action. Here, it is notable that commentators from outside the movement often emphasise the debt survivor activists owe to anti-psychiatry, whereas survivor activists who were actually involved at the time are more conscious of the movement as an autonomous activity.

There is obviously a huge amount of material that is not currently available to interested parties. We encourage people to find and list documents relating to their own involvement in the survivor movement and we hope that local, regional and national organisations will do so too. We also suggest that people write their own accounts of involvement. When memories are combined with records, the records come alive and give even more substance to the memories. Recording interviews with activists is another possibility we hope to explore. The voice of survivors has regularly been expressed in poetry,

“Many people are ignorant of what mental health users have achieved in the past, and some are unconvinced that it is really relevant to what could happen today and in the future.”



Yvonne Slater and Peter Street find something to laugh about at the Survivors History Group exhibition

drama and other arts, and we also want to include this in our histories and archives.

Although we are a small group with limited resources, we have ambitious ideas. If discouraged by the difficulties of turning ideas into practice, we are encouraged by the enthusiastic response we receive from users, survivors and others. Together, we can make a real contribution to a fuller and more accurate description of the history of our movement, and to a more thorough and more open debate of what has been significant and why.

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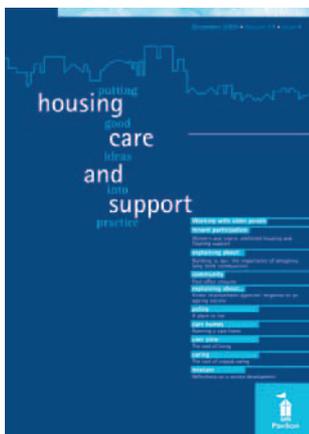
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More information about the group's work and how to get involved can be requested from the secretary, Survivors History Group, 177 Glenarm Road, London E5 0NB or online at <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm>.

Peter Campbell is a mental health system survivor and works as a freelance trainer in the mental health field. He was a founder member of Survivors Speak Out and Survivors' Poetry.

Andrew Roberts has suffered from suicidal depression intermittently since childhood. Active in patients' groups since joining the Ingrebourne Society in 1963, he was a member of the Mental Patients Union from 1973.

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